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## Short Documentary Production

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## **Short Documentary Production**

### **Overview and Rationale**

Documentary films provide an alternative platform for filmmakers to tell stories about social and political problems that mainstream media outlets tend to ignore. Documentaries are also used as tools for organizing and for supporting civic action thanks to the proliferation of the new digital media technologies and the opening of the global public sphere to all those who have access to the Internet and the many social media outlets. The main challenge I have faced as a teacher of digital film production, at a university whose mission strongly upholds and promotes the values of social justice, is how to organize my documentary production course so that my students can engage with local communities and institutions and produce short films that serve the larger goal of social justice.

The course's theme of "making a difference with documentary film" inspired me to put into practice the principles of engaging the world in a production course; hence, "making a difference" required my students to work with Bay Area organizations devoted to helping communities in need. I provide my students with a list of potential organizations that are likely to collaborate with us and in all cases I secure the name of a contact person who would work directly with my students. During the first week of the quarter, I invite to the class representatives of these organizations who are willing to talk to us so they may introduce the type of work they do and identify in which areas they feel a short documentary would benefit their ongoing efforts. Most often, I take on the task of introducing the organizations to the class myself based on the information I gathered via e-mail and phone conversations. On occasion, I make trips to potential collaborators with interested students for face-to-face meetings. Based on the information they receive in class and the organizations' pamphlets and documents they have access to on-line, students select an organization and start working with its representative to develop a documentary project.

In my experience, social justice organizations are in general open to working with students whose projects are supervised by an instructor. The way I approach local organizations involves research to identify institutions and groups who are active in the community and who may be willing to collaborate with us. I reach out to these organizations via e-mail, the purpose of which is to introduce myself, the nature of the production course I teach, and the parameters of the projects that my students will develop. In most cases, the e-mails are followed by phone conversations with the contact person to further clarify the goals of the collaboration and agree on the rights to the finished projects. As a rule, students and the university hold the rights to the documentaries and the organization gets a copy to be used to promote their work. I have been teaching this course for a while now and I have never been obligated to draw up a formal contract between the organizations we have worked with. They are happy to get a film that publicizes their mission and my students get to practice documentary filmmaking for a good cause.

My students have made short documentaries on the following topics with the following organizations: Immigrant rights and human trafficking (of women and girls) in collaboration with The Katharine and George Alexander Law Center, an organization which provides free legal counsel to low-income workers and immigrants; wrongfully convicted people who have been exonerated, in collaboration with the Northern California Innocence Project; voting and immigrant rights, in collaboration with SIREN (Services, Immigrant Rights, and Education Network); and survivors of torture, in collaboration with the Center for Survivors of Torture, a program that is part of AACI (Asian Americans For Community Involvement). The list of organizations that I initially contacted is longer, but I am including only those that my students and I have collaborated with so far.

Below, I outline the instructional strategies I developed to achieve the goals of the course.

The undergraduate documentary production course I teach in the Digital Filmmaking Program, in the Communication Department at Santa Clara University requires us, by virtue of the mission of the department, to strive to bridge practice and theory in all the courses we teach. Thus, in this Short Documentary Production Course (Communication 132B), students are taught the technical skills and the knowledge needed in pre-production (budgeting and production planning), production (camera operation, sound, and lighting), and post-production (non-linear editing), as well as some key aspects of the history, theory and criticism of the documentary. Students are required to write an individual short reflection paper on the relationship between theory, as it pertains to the filmic strategy they opted for or concepts such as authorship or subjectivity, and the production of their documentaries. Michael Rabiger's book, *Directing the Documentary* (required), a hands-on text, is complemented by an excerpt from Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary* and a short article on the ethics in documentary filmmaking. In addition, we screen excerpts from a variety of documentary films to introduce students to the key modes of representation in documentary film.

Excerpts from key films include: The Lumiere Brothers' First Films, Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*, Getino and Solanas' *The Hour of the Furnaces*, Guzman's, *The Battle of Chile*, Fricke's *Baraka*, Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*, Reidelshheimer's *Rivers and Tides*, Caouette's *Tarnation*, Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, Hopkins' *Living in Emergency*, Kruvant's *Heart of Stone*, and Fan's *Last Train Home*.

The focus of this course has been primarily on the observational documentary, which relies on the observation and capturing of real events from a distance with no use of interviews or voice over (Rabiger, pp. 84-87; Nichols, pp. 109-115); Cinema Verite or interactive documentary, which involves interviews and interaction between the filmmakers and the participants (Rabiger, pp. 88-89; Nichols, pp. 115-123); and poetic documentary, a genre that privileges a more subjective (sometimes abstract) representation of reality and relies primarily on visual and subtextual meaning and less on explicit presentation of information about a problem (Nichols, pp. 102-105; Rabiger, pp. 303-306).

The course functions as a combination forum and workshop. In the forum component, we explore through readings, screenings, and discussions the techniques and styles adopted by

classic and contemporary documentary filmmakers, with the goal of providing sources of inspiration to students as they develop their own styles. In the workshop component, working in groups, students develop, produce, and edit their own short documentary projects (between 5 and 7 minutes long). The contexts for students' learning include two weekly lecture sessions and the weekly labs (taught by a lab supervisor). In the lecture sessions, students learn about the key documentary filmmaking styles and techniques, develop their projects, share their ideas and concerns with the class, screen their footage and rough cuts, and receive feedback and tips on how to solve technical, aesthetic and logistical problems in their productions. In the labs, students learn how to operate the equipment so that they are proficient in camera and lighting gear and the Avid editing system.

### **The Learning Process**

Once the students have been paired with an organization, with the help of the contact person, they start narrowing down the topic of their documentary by selecting a specific area of mutual interest and by focusing on a main subject or character for the film. For example, the group of students working with the Northern California Innocence Project is introduced to a wrongfully convicted person who spent many years in prison before he was exonerated, and his story became the focus of their documentary. Similarly, in the case of the group of students who worked with the Law Center, the collaboration focused on one of their clients, a Mexican woman who had been smuggled to the U.S. and forced into prostitution. This woman's story became the topic of the documentary they produced. In the case of the association with the Center for Survivors of Torture, the students were able to tell the story of a survivor of torture from Iraq who had been granted Asylum in the U.S. and who struggles to adapt to a new social setting and culture. The group of students who worked with SIREN focused on a young undocumented Mexican teenager who came to the U.S. with her parents when she was thirteen years old and now at age seventeen, about to enter college, is trying to live a normal life without the constant threat of deportation. Her hopes to get a temporary stay in the U.S. and be given a work permit after she applied for the Deferred Action program became the story of this documentary.

Working within a ten-week quarter system puts tremendous pressure on the students to accomplish what is required of them in a short time span. Organization, planning, and dedication to the course become essential to maximizing the learning of the skills needed to succeed in film production. In the lab sessions, students learn how to operate the equipment for shooting, lighting and editing with the Avid system. Students are immersed in hands-on learning of the various tools needed to produce films, which include the operation of the Panasonic AG-HPX300 camera, the production workflow with P2 cards, recording sound using pertinent microphones and the Shure mixer, the editing tools of the Avid Media Composer ISIS, LED and Tungsten lighting kits, Rifas, and Frezzi lights.

It should be noted that the goals of this lesson plan could be achieved without relying on fairly advanced and relatively costly equipment such as the kind used in our program. Now that the HD format has become common, there is much choice in professional digital video cameras today, which include DSLR cameras. Video cameras are available at all budget-levels and with all kinds of features, specs, and sophistication. What is more important, I believe, is the commitment to social justice documentary filmmaking and to reaching out to grassroots groups

and organizations for collaboration on relevant issues. From a technological standpoint, any digital camera with a three-pin XLR capability, decent microphones to record sound and interviews, and basic lighting kits will suffice to shoot projects. Similarly, any non-linear editing software such as Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premiere, Pinnacle, and even iMovie would accomplish the tasks required in editing.

In the lecture sessions, students learn the language and art of the documentary by screening excerpts from the films mentioned above, and by discussing the film techniques and strategies used by different filmmakers (Rabiger, pp. 24-25 and 67-84). They also learn about the complexity of the notion of objectivity and the role of subjectivity in the making of documentaries (Rabiger, pp. 17-19). A knowledge of the language of the documentary starts with knowing where to put the camera to film a person or an event. Hence students are introduced to camera motivation and coverage or where one should position the camera to frame the action in a scene, whether it is an interview or an activity of some sort (Rabiger, pp. 453-461). They are also introduced to point of view or the perspective from which a particular scene is shown, i.e. from a character's or from the filmmaker's perspective (Rabiger, pp. 259-282).

Planning for production requires that students learn how to put together a pre-production packet, including finding locations, planning the shoot, and budgeting (Rabiger, pp. 121-130). Documentary production entails learning how to conduct and shoot interviews and distinguish between on-axis interview (when the interviewee is addressing the camera), and off-axis interview (when the interviewee is addressing the interviewer to the left or right of the camera). These interview techniques as well as the choice between the use of static versus mobile camera techniques are practiced in class before students are sent out on shooting assignments (Rabiger, pp. 468-470). Post-production revolves primarily around editing and in this course, students learn the key techniques of editing to create compelling narratives that combine interviews, cutaways, and b-roll or the supplementary footage used to illustrate the content of what is being said in the interviews (Rabiger, pp. 207-249).

The ethical issues documentarians face when filming people and securing consent from them are also addressed in this course so that students learn to respect the dignity and the fundamental human rights of the people who are featured in their films. Students are made aware of what constitutes "informed consent" which requires the filmmaker to share with the participants the film's goal and possible consequences regarding their contribution to the film, once it is completed and released to the public (Rabiger, pp. 354-360; Pryluck, pp. 261-262).

Students practice the basic techniques of shooting observational documentary and Cinema Verite, as per the following preliminary exercises:

### **Shooting Exercise 1: Observing an event or activity**

In this assignment, you are asked (with your partners) to be observers and to capture an event, a ritual, or any activity that involves people doing something in a particular location. The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to practice the observational style of documentary. Choose a place on or near campus (a café, a bookstore, a library, a church, a dance studio, a park, a train or bus station, etc.) where people are involved in some kind of an activity (studying, praying,

working, consuming products, waiting, meditating, dancing, etc.) and film the people as they go about their doings. Remember that in the observational mode of representation, you will be recording unobtrusively what people are involved in without them openly addressing the camera or you intervening in the film milieu.

For this exercise, you will be using the Panasonic 300 camera on a tripod to shoot the event or activity and a shotgun mic to record natural/ambient sound. The location can be indoors or outdoors. If you choose to shoot indoors, make sure that you have enough available light to record well-exposed images. There is no need to use the light kit for this assignment. In all cases, do not forget to white balance your camera.

Make sure you get a good coverage of the action by varying your angles and shots using long and medium shots, and close-ups. Your raw footage (5 minutes maximum) will be screened in class.

### **Shooting Exercise 2: Cinema Verite**

In this short exercise students learn the basic principles of conducting and shooting interviews in the cinema Verite or interactive style.

In this exercise, you are asked to shoot a series of interviews in the cinema verite (interactive) style. The goal of this assignment is to give you the chance to practice interviewing people with the aim of capturing their inner truth or the truth as provoked by the presence of the camera. Using the Panasonic 300 camcorder, the sound mixer and a boom mic, go out on campus and find three people to interview. These people must be employees of Santa Clara University (gardeners, landscapers, handyman, janitors, waiters, cooks, administrative staff, professors, librarians, etc.). Do not interview students or student workers, as they are your peers. Instead, interact with manual and intellectual workers who are different in age, occupation, class, or ethnicity. Ask the three employees to identify which aspects of their work give them pleasure and which parts of their job are unfulfilling. Ask whether SCU treats them well. Why or why not?

Remember that what you want to achieve in these interviews is to extract some kind of truth of the moment, to capture some of the subjects' feelings in their answers about their occupations. They may be forthcoming and give you good and compelling answers; but if not, you should use your skills of persuasion to provoke interesting answers. Follow up on short answers and make sure that their responses are long enough and have adequate usable substance.

### **Guidelines**

1. Since you will be interviewing three people, each member of the group must take the position of cameraperson, interviewer, sound engineer/boom operator combined. A team of four will interview four people and will rotate around the positions of cameraperson, interviewer, sound engineer, and boom operator.
2. Depending on the setting, your filmic strategy, and the effect you want to achieve, you may use static (tripod) or moving (handheld) camera. Remember that your technique (form) should serve the content of the interviews.

3. The interviews should not be longer than three minutes each.
4. Your raw footage is due the following class period.

The footage from the two preliminary shooting exercises are reviewed in class and evaluated in terms of framing, composition, image quality, interview strategies, and whether the footage achieves the goals of the exercises. The purpose of these two exercises is to give students the opportunity to practice shooting in two documentary modes and to apply what they have learned from the experience and feedback to their main project. Students are also assigned two preliminary editing exercises to allow them to practice editing with the Avid Media Composer and to structure their footage into a compelling narrative.

### **Editing Exercise 1**

Your first editing assignment will consist of cutting the footage shot for Shooting Exercise 1 to create a short documentary that will convey the mood of the place and what the people are doing there. The edited film should not exceed 3 minutes in length. The only transitions you are allowed to use are straight cuts. No music is allowed, use only the ambient sound you recorded with your footage. While this is a group assignment, every student must contribute to the editing and final shaping of this short observational documentary.

### **Editing Assignment 2**

Your second editing assignment consists of editing the footage you shot for Shooting Exercise 2 when conducting the three or four interviews. In this exercise, you are asked to study the footage and select the best segments from each interview, then to edit them together to create a short documentary on the feelings and views of employees working at SCU. Make sure that your edited sequence tells a self-contained mini-story of the interviewees as they express their feelings about working at SCU.

### **Guidelines**

1. You may use straight cuts, fades, and dissolves to open and close your piece and to transition between shots and scenes.
2. You may also use music (not required) if you deem necessary, but remember music is effective only if it helps create a particular mood, adds power to an emotional state/moment, or if it helps move the story forward. There must be a dramatic/storytelling reason to use music.
3. You may use titles (not required). Remember that the titles are included in the 3-minute time limit of your short documentary.
4. The edited film should not exceed 3 minutes in length and each member of the group must edit her/his own version of the interviews.

**Grading sheet for the above exercises****Shooting & Editing Exercise I**

(Observational assignment)

Poor

Good

Very good

Technical considerations  
(White balance, framing, focus, editing)

Scene Coverage  
(Variety of shots)

Activity, mood of place captured  
(Camera unobtrusive, fly-on-the-wall approach)

Editing of sequence  
(Straight cuts, timing, pace, rhythm)

Assignment guidelines  
(Followed/not followed)

Overall comments:

Grade:

**Shooting & Editing Exercise II**

(Cinema Verite assignment)

Poor

Good

Very good

Technical considerations  
(White balance, framing, focus, movement,  
Sound, lighting)

Scene Coverage / Grammatical rules  
(Variety of shots)

Right questions asked / Interviewer as listener  
(Direct and unambiguous questions)

Truth of the moment captured  
(Camera as catalyst, openness of interviewees)

Editing of sequence  
(Cuts, transitions, timing, pace, rhythm)

Assignment guidelines  
(Followed/not followed)

Overall comments:

Grade:



## Course Timeline

This lesson plan is designed for a ten-week course as per the time frame of the quarter system. To cover the course content and provide students with the skills needed to produce a short documentary, the ten-week quarter time is organized as follows: the first five weeks are devoted to teaching the documentary modes of filmmaking, the equipment, and helping the students develop their projects and the second five weeks are reserved for the production and post-production of the films. Below are specifics about the introductory lesson plans:

### Week 1

The goals for week 1 are to introduce the course objectives and requirements, to form the production teams, and introduce the organizations to the class. Students are also introduced to non-fiction cinema and are shown excerpts from the First Films of the Lumiere Brothers and Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. The assigned readings are from Rabiger's text and cover documentary language and grammar and artistic identity. In the lab, students are introduced to the Panasonic 300 and the P2 card workflow.

### Week 2

Students present to the class their topic ideas and are introduced to the interactive and observational modes of documentary filmmaking. We screen excerpts from Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*, Fan's *Last Train Home*, and Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*. Students read Rabiger on developing story ideas and the importance of research in pre-production. Shooting Exercise 1 (observational footage) is assigned. In the lab, the focus is on sound, including microphones and the sound mixer.

### Week 3

Students submit Status Reports on planning, research, and progress with the organizations. The observational footage is reviewed in class and attention is paid to framing, type of shots and what they represent in light of the assignment. Both problematic and good executions of the assignment are discussed so that students learn the right approaches to shooting people in their environment. Shooting Exercise 2 (Cinema Verite) and Editing Exercise 1 are assigned. Students are also taught the basic principle of conducting and shooting interviews with a demonstration in class. They read Rabiger on conducting and shooting interviews.

In the lab, students are introduced to the Avid Media Composer and its basic editing tools. Finally, students are introduced to the components of pre-production as per the following handout:

### The Pre-Production Packet (Work Group Assignment)

Your pre-production packet must include the following items:

1. A finalized proposal: this is a revised version of the draft proposal (See Rabiger, pp. 585-86).
2. A treatment: the treatment must begin with a working hypothesis (see Rabiger, p. 123) and a through line (metaphor/overarching signifier of the story). What is a through line?

A through line is simply an objective look at the problem that is affecting *everyone* in your documentary. For details on how to write a treatment, see the accompanying handout.

3. A shooting outline/plan: this is the master plan that contains a full description of all the visual sequences and accompanying outline of the ideas/themes to be addressed in the scenes. A shooting outline is the translation of the treatment into scenes, and shots. The shooting outline includes all the scenes that make up the beginning, middle, and end of your film (remember the three-act structure?). The best approach here is to try to visualize as best as you can the scenes that will encompass each act (See Rabiger, pp. 127-28).
4. A shooting schedule: this will comprise a daily shooting plan, which presupposes that you have already done your research on the topic and made contact with potential interviewees. The shooting schedule includes the plan for shooting all the visuals your sequence requires, including B-roll and stock footage (if applicable).
5. Interviewee list: provide the names, contact information (phone numbers and addresses) of all the people you will be interviewing.
6. Location list: this includes all the locations you will be using for your shoot, the contacts (names and phone numbers) you have made to secure permission to shoot in particular locations, (permits to shoot in restricted areas if this applies to your shoot). The location list must also include the specifications in terms of lighting needs and sound recording conditions (can you plug in your lights if you are shooting indoors or at night? Do you have enough outlets? Enough power? Can you record sound without any interference?)
7. A crew list: this is the list of all production personnel and the respective crew positions assigned to each crewmember. Are you using extra help in addition to the three members of your team? If so, you need to include the names and functions they will perform.
8. A budget: this includes a budget top sheet (summary of the main budget categories) and an itemized budget that provides details about all the costs that will be incurred in the making of your documentary. The costs must include a column for budget (real costs if you were to produce this film out there in the real world and a column for actual costs (real costs for making the documentary with free equipment and facilities).
9. Editing schedule: the approximate dates when you will start editing, when you finish your rough cut, your fine cut, your final mix (music, sound effects, etc.). Remember that you have to pace your work so that you are in line with the course schedule in the syllabus. This means that by week 8, you must have a rough cut to show to the class, and by week 10, you must have a fine cut.

#### Week 4

Status reports on pre-production process, story and schedule updates. Students learn additional technical and aesthetic tips for the documentary. Shooting with editing in mind, visualization and setting up interviews, the importance of action footage, B-roll, and cutaways are discussed. In this session, students are also introduced to the poetic documentary genre and to budgeting. Students read Rabiger on point of view, story structure and dramatic development and watch excerpts from Riedelsheimer's *Rivers and Tides*, Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, and Fricke's *Baraka*. In the lab, students learn and practice the Avid fine-tuning tools.

The shooting and editing exercises for both observational and interactive assignments are reviewed in class. Particular attention is paid to rhythm and timing of the cuts in the editing exercise and framing, shot types, and the interviewing process to the interactive footage. The learning objective in these week's sessions is for students to note the differences between well-executed filmic and editing strategies that tell a story and less satisfactory approaches, critical learning experiences they can apply when completing their final project.

### Week 5

The work groups are given feedback on their pre-production packets during office hours. In class, students present status reports on pre-production and shooting schedules. They are introduced to the ethics of documentary filmmaking with Rabiger's chapter on ethics and Calvin Pryluck's essay "Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filming." Students watch excerpt from *Titicut Follies* to discuss the power relationships between filmmakers and participants and the potential for exploitation and coercion when filming people. Using this example, students discuss the issue of informed consent and competency to consent on the part of the inmates filmed by Wiseman.

The objective is to raise awareness about moral issues involved in the filming of people who are not usually fully informed about the intentions of the filmmaker with regard to the finished product. Students learn that honesty and transparency with the subjects participating in their projects strike a balance between society's right to know and the participants' right to be protected from disrespect and humiliation.

In this week, students also attend a lighting workshop in the lab where they are introduced to the tools for lighting and practice shooting interviews indoors using light kits during one lecture session. Students read Rabiger's chapter on lighting.

### Week 6

By week 6, work groups have a shooting schedule and some have begun production. Students are required to bring to the class their dailies so they may get feedback from their peers and me. Students present their status reports on shooting schedules, and updates. During this week, students are introduced to the post-production essentials, from logging and studying the rushes, to understanding the function of the paper edit and first assembly. The assigned readings include Rabiger's chapters on editing and the use of narration. We also screen excerpts from Hopkins' *Living in Emergency* and Guzman's *The Battle of Chile* to illustrate the use of characterization in documentaries, the importance of voice over, and the concept of a shared commitment to a cause between filmmakers and their subjects.

In the lab, students revisit camera and sound and practice interviewing students on campus on topics such as diversity or same sex marriage. The goal is to give students more practice with the camera and sound equipment and sharpen their interviewing skills.

### Weeks 7-10

The primary focus of the lesson plan is on post-production, i.e. students' dailies, assembly cuts, rough cuts, and ultimately fine cuts. In lecture sessions, students are given feedback on their cuts and are taught how to refine the editing, and by extension, the stories of their films. They are also

introduced to the role of music in documentaries. In the labs they are taught to generate titles, to color correct the images in need of tweaking, and to adjust the sound levels of the different tracks in the timeline. During exam week, the films are screened to the public, including the representatives of the organizations with whom we collaborated.

### Outcomes

The quarter system is very challenging for both students and professors, especially in demanding production courses such as this one. It is demanding on the students because they have to learn the technical skills needed for film production and also to invest so much time outside of the classroom to fulfill the requirements of the course to produce good short documentaries in just 10 weeks. It is challenging to me because I am compelled to cover so many aspects of the production process in such a short time and to keep the momentum going from the first to the last week of the quarter. Another more universal problem is that not all students, and hence, production teams, are sufficiently motivated to meet the demands of documentary filmmaking, particularly in this kind of intensive course.

Regardless of the above demands, what has impressed me is the willingness and ability of several of my students to transcend the limitations of privilege. SCU students are typically white, middle and upper class, with little experience with poverty or oppression. The process of making these films is transformative in virtually every case, as they meet people whose experiences are nearly incomprehensible in their difficulty and tragedy. Predictably, the films themselves have been of uneven quality, with some teams producing outstanding work such as *Jasmine*, the story of the woman refugee from Iraq who has witnessed the murder of members of her family, *Forced*, the story of human trafficking involving a Mexican woman who was forced into prostitution, and *Twelve and a Half*, the story of a wrongly convicted man who spent twelve and a half years in prison. In all cases, though, the organizations with whom the students have worked have benefited from these productions and feature them on their websites and use them as part of their campaigns.

Perhaps most importantly of all is the fact that many of these students come away with a very different sense of the world and of their place in it. Some will go on to pursue work in the film and television industries and others will continue to use digital film in witnessing and communicating issues of social injustice.

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## Biography

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**Dr. Yahia Mahamdi** joined Santa Clara University in 1999 after finishing his MFA in film at Columbia University. He holds a PhD in Radio-Television-Film from the University of Texas at Austin, and received his B.A. and M.A. in Cinema Studies from the University of Paris in France, where he studied under Jean Rouch, one of the pioneers of Cinema Verite. Dr. Mahamdi teaches digital film production and global cinema in the Digital Filmmaking Program, part of the Communication Department at Santa Clara University. Currently, he is working on a feature length documentary on issues of diversity and inclusiveness at SCU.